

# Wilfred Ethelbert Messer

Census Taker and Civil Servant



The Rotarian, Vol. 110, No. 2 (February 1967).

The U.S. Census Bureau is proud of its history of continually evolving to ensure an accurate count of the people of the United States. For this reason, the Census Bureau has always embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce representative of the local communities. From the beginning of our country’s history to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States has expanded not only westward, but also outward, including into the nearby Caribbean. Some acquisitions, like those of Cuba and Puerto Rico, resulted from military action, while we acquired others, like the U.S. Virgin Islands, through purchases. While conducting censuses in these new territories, census officials generally relied on local supervisors and census takers, who had the trust, knowledge, and experience needed to work with their communities.

Wilfred Ethelbert Messer was born on November 22, 1894, on the island of St. Croix, in what was then the Danish West Indies. Wilfred’s parents, Peter and Christine, fished the ocean, while his older sisters, Leonara and Delma, worked as seamstresses, which allowed Wilfred and his five younger siblings to attend school. An eager student, Wilfred quickly conquered the modest schooling available on St. Croix and began taking correspondence courses for several subjects, most notably the Boyd Shorthand method. In 1910, Wilfred began working as a teacher, and as his correspondence education progressed, he eventually became a clerk in the education department.

Island St. Croix DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS  
CITY OR RURAL DISTRICT Frederiksted CENSUS OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF UNITED STATES: 1917 SHEET No. 7 OF 8  
ENumerated BY ME ON THE 8th DAY OF January 1918 ENumeration DISTRICT No. 22  
POPULATION 100 SPECIAL AGENT Wm. H. Fisher

NAME	RELATION	SEX	AGE	RACE	CITIZENSHIP	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION
<u>Mr. Messer, Wilfred</u>	<u>Head</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Peter</u>	<u>Wife</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Christine</u>	<u>Daughter</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Delma</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Leonara</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Wilfred</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Delma</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Christine</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Peter</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Wilfred</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Delma</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Christine</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>
<u>Mr. Messer, Peter</u>	<u>Son</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Teacher</u>

Historic census records are maintained and released by the National Archives and Records Administration, not the U.S. Census Bureau.

Visit <http://www.archives.gov> for more information about publicly available records like the one shown here.

Wilfred and his family’s 1917 Census.

ISLAND OF ST. CROIX—Continued.		
ENUMERATION DISTRICTS.		Enumerators.
No.	Designation.	
22	Christiansted Town .....	Ilva A. Forbes.
23	Christiansted Town .....	Halvor Gordon.
24	Christiansted Town .....	Edna B. Forbes.
25	Christiansted Town .....	Haidee E. Rengger.
26	Christiansted Town .....	Wilfred E. Messer.
27	Christiansted Town .....	Joseph E. Ritzberg.
28	Christiansted Town .....	Elias Williams.
29	Christiansted Town .....	Medora A. Jackson.
30	Frederiksted Town .....	Agnes M. Golden.
31	Frederiksted Town .....	Maud E. Flannagan.
32	Frederiksted Town .....	Enos Kerr.
33	Frederiksted Town .....	Alexandra M. Grandjean.
34	Frederiksted Town .....	Walter A. Browne.
35	Frederiksted Town .....	Altagracia M. Milligin.

Wilfred listed as an enumerator for the 1917

way to get competent, trustworthy, and knowledgeable workers was to hire local teachers. The census was delayed from November to December in 1917, in part due to transportation problems. As a result, the teachers, including Wilfred, started the enumeration of St. Croix on December 31, 1917, during the holiday break.

It was in a measure fortunate that the census of the islands was deferred until the latter part of December, since the services of the school-teachers could be utilized during the Christmas vacation. If the enumeration had commenced on November 1, no doubt considerable trouble would have been experienced in securing enumerators qualified to do the work.

Excerpt from the 1917 Census of the Virgin Islands.

In addition to counting the people of the Virgin Islands, the 1917 Census also covered manufactures, agriculture, and fisheries, as well as asked special questions on wages and hours worked. During the census, which ended on January 12, 1918, Wilfred counted 766 people in his enumeration district.

Due to the special census in 1917, the Census Bureau did not include the Virgin Islands in the decennial census in 1920. However, starting in 1930, the Virgin Islands have been included in the decennial count, and Wilfred continued to work as an enumerator for both the 1930 and 1940 censuses. Throughout Wilfred’s census experience, he saw the population in his city of Christiansted, decrease from 4,574 in 1917 to 3,767 in 1930 and then rebound to 4,495 in 1940. The 1940 Census also included the first Census of Housing. Enumerators had conducted this survey on a separate form because Congress had approved it late in the decennial planning process. If enumerators could not gather the information during their initial visit, they would do so shortly thereafter.

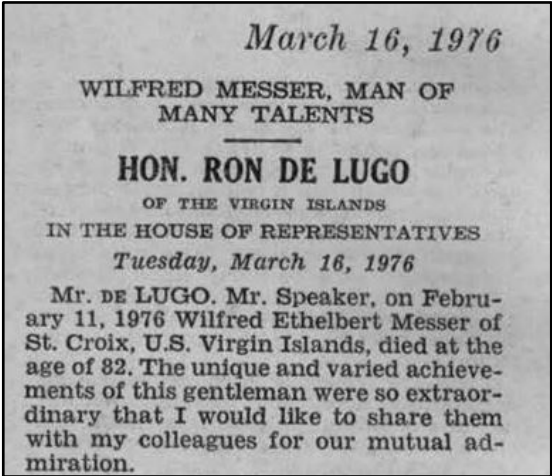
Another major innovation of the 1940 Census was the use of advanced statistical techniques, including probability sampling, which before had been used only on an experimental basis. Sampling in the 1940 Census allowed the addition of a number of demographic questions without unduly increasing the overall burden on respondents and on data processing. In 1917, Wilfred asked 21 questions of all members of the population; in 1930, 32 questions; and in 1940, 34 questions on the population

survey, with an additional 16 questions asked to only 5 percent of the population. Despite these increases, probability sampling made it possible to publish preliminary results 8 months ahead of the complete tabulations. Additionally, it allowed the Census Bureau to increase the number of detailed tables published, as well as review the quality of the data processing with more efficiency.

The questions from Wilfred’s schedules from 1917, 1930, and 1940.

Following his census work in 1940, Wilfred left the education department and continued in the federal service when he became court clerk for the St. Croix district court. He continued in that position for 22 years before retiring on December 31, 1962. In addition to his public service, Wilfred also enjoyed raising and breeding livestock, including cattle, horses, and other animals. After acquiring a farm on the island of St. Johns, he worked his way up from amateur to expert over the decades, and raised several prized racehorses. Wilfred played cornet in his youth, sang for several decades in his church choir, and occasionally appeared in locally produced musicals.

Wilfred married Daphne Lange in 1920, and they remain married until she passed away after 42 years. They raised a large family of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, to whom Wilfred was known as “Papetes.”



Part of the address to the U.S. House of Representatives honoring Wilfred in 1976.

Wilfred also participated in several civic and social organizations, including the Society of the Friends of Denmark, the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks, the Rotary Club, the Red Cross, and served as a member of the local Select Service Board. His public service was considered so remarkable that, after his death on February 11, 1976, the representative from the Virgin Islands officially honored him in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Census Bureau is grateful for Wilfred’s lifelong dedication to public service, our country, and our agency.